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Introduction: What is a medium? Theologies, technologies and aspirations

Anybody posing the question ‘What is a medium?’ has to confront the great multiplicity and broad range of the items and phenomena that have been considered a medium in the scholarly literature. Certainly, for many authors the field of media vastly exceeds the realm of communication technology in an everyday sense. To give an impression, in a recent survey of the field, the following objects and phenomena were listed as having been labelled a medium: a chair, a wheel, a mirror (McLuhan); a school class, a soccer ball, a waiting room (Flusser); the electoral system, a general strike, the street (Baudrillard); a horse, the dromedary, the elephant (Virilio); money, power and influence (Parsons); art, belief and love (Luhmann) (Münker and Roesler 2008: 11). What, then, if anything, cannot be a medium? And, more to the point of this issue, could the answers we might give point to something like an anthropological approach to media?

The growing involvement of anthropologists with the question of media in the last 15 years has to be understood against larger shifts in anthropological debates about culture that pre-date the current interest in media practices. The movement from more bounded, static and spatially rooted understandings of culture towards more fractured and contested notions between the 1970s and 1990s has resulted in a widely shared understanding among socio-cultural anthropologists about culture as not just politically contested as the worn phrase of the ‘politics of culture’ indicates. More importantly, it brought about a perspective on cultural traditions as publicly circulating, as for example captured in Appadurai and Breckenridge’s notion of ‘public culture’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988). While the national frames of such public circulation remain highly relevant, as evident in continuing scholarly output on, for example, Indian public culture, public culture is also part of globally networked imaginations. Regardless of the current disruptions of processes of globalisation, and the uncertainty about whether globalisation will see drastic reversals in the future, under ongoing conditions such cultural circulation occurs at greater scale and speed. Anthropologists have therefore begun to see the modalities of the public circulation of culture, above all the circulation of images and discourse, as one of the key questions in cultural analysis.

The insight that nationality, ethnicity and other forms of belonging emerge through changes in the way culture circulates, such as through print media, modern forms of governance, and colonial archives as exemplified in the work of Benedict Anderson and Bernard Cohn, has greatly influenced anthropologists and has prompted them to continue such research in other domains, such as on entertainment and advertisement industries, journalists and other media producers, burgeoning religious media, as well as linguistic diversity and media. Since what is now widely seen as an anthropology of media developed in the early 1990s with, for example, research on indigenous media by Faye Ginsburg and Terence Turner, those who began to describe their work in such terms have combined insights into the situatedness of media practices with attention to the formal specifics and materialities of media technologies. At the same time anthropological engagement with more current understandings of media as a particular set of technologies, practices and networks raised larger issues of cultural mediation (Mazzarella 2004). Such questions are in turn especially salient in religious media, where the links between media practices and assumptions about the processes enabling the interaction between religious practitioners and the spiritual are particularly marked, as several of the contributors in this issue point out.

The anthropological focus on the socio-cultural contexts of media practices has certainly placed media anthropologists at odds with a tendency among some media theorists who have suggested that particular social and political outcomes can be read off from the formal and technical dimensions of media technologies. An important inspiration in this regard was Marshall McLuhan's theorising of newer electronic media as bringing about the demise of the 'Gutenberg galaxy' and its associated ways of life, and the emergence of a 'global village' with new sensory habits through the impact of such new technologies (McLuhan 1964). Authors as different as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Friedrich Kittler have argued that the technical dimensions of newer electronic media have such an enormous influence in the contemporary world that they are reshaping humans and their social and political arrangements along the lines of their formal properties (Baudrillard 1994; Kittler 1997; Virilio 1998). Nevertheless, while rejecting the technicism that underlies such analyses, anthropologists do share some of the intuitions of these authors about contemporary media as powerful and creative forces, and at least some of their motivations to study contemporary media practices in various settings stem from a conviction that such practices are in fact creators of new worlds.

The creative character and great salience of newer media technologies today gives rise to two related paradoxes that the contributors in this issue address. The first paradox relates to the productive powers of media. On one hand it seems clear that media are the very opposite of autonomous forces, as they only exist as an 'in-between', and are fully dependent on what is being mediated through them. On the other hand, for both a considerable number of anthropologists and media theorists, they now also appear as generative and even 'demiurgical' powers (Krämer 2008) that remake human subjectivities and socio-cultural worlds. That is, seen from this perspective, media oscillate between a tenuous and even parasitical existence, and a role of world producer shaping and sometimes even overriding human agency. A similar alternation between ghostly withdrawal and very powerful presence can also be found in the observation that increasing numbers of peoples in the contemporary world associate more immediate, 'live and direct' forms of interaction with new media technologies. Therein lies a second paradox that is of great importance for an understanding of current media

practices. More and more people project their wishes for doing away with a mediating 'in-between', and for more 'immediate' connections on ever more complex technical media apparatuses.

Mediation and immediacy, religion and remediation

This latter paradox containing the oscillation between mediation and immediacy that often characterises the unfolding of media practices is of key importance for all the authors in this issue, and a starting point for their explorations of the question 'what is a medium?' In doing so, they examine how different dimensions of mediation relate to each other in situated uses of media technology. Analysing the worldwide spread of the Brazilian Pentecostal church Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), Martijn Oosterbaan shows how the making visible of a plurality of different media is a central strategy of the church's global expansion. Drawing on Henry Jenkin's notion of 'convergence culture', Oosterbaan argues that the hypermediacy resulting from this strategy paradoxically brings about an impression of the 'real presence' of an emerging global Christian community. In a related manner, Mattijs van de Port examines the foregrounding of the man-made machinery of mediation as one particular script that underpins the 'cultural production of the real', while Dominic Boyer analyses the struggles of German news agency journalists who seek to recuperate a sense of professional agency within the systemic constraints created by the growing demands of the automated parts of journalistic work. In his essay, journalists deploy 'strategies of immediation' through which journalists attempt to deal with their work environment experienced both in terms of praxiological agentive subjectivity as well as ruled by systemic constraints imposed by media technology. The dialectics of mediation and immediacy are also addressed in the papers by Birgit Meyer and Patrick Eisenlohr. In different ways their contributions point to the significance of underlying semiotic ideologies for enabling effects of relative immediacy through careful deployment of media technology. While Meyer stresses the role of such ideologies in the authorisation of religious sensations that make spiritual forces appear as immediate and real, Eisenlohr calls attention to the role such background assumptions and ideas about media and mediation play in scenarios of religious diversity.

Media generativism and crises of mediation

One important question that recurs in the contributions to this special issue is how people's ideas about what media are and what they do become part of the process of generating new cultural and political forms, as well as the kinds of changes they bring about. That is, media generativism as a widespread position among both everyday users and academic analysts of media is often grounded in such fundamental assumptions about the nature of particular media technologies and their consequences. The introduction of new media technologies is often accompanied by enthusiastic expectations about their effects, as evidenced in contemporary excitement about 'new media', such as the 'Web 2.0'. In a way, such new media technologies are then the concretisation of desires for more efficient, more 'direct' forms of interaction as well as social and political arrangements reformed accordingly. The reverse side of this

observation is that new forms of media can also be regarded as the response to dissatisfaction with established forms of mediation. This raises the question of the social and historical conditions provoking dissatisfaction with such established forms of mediation. What do they imply for the study of the cultural and political phenomena whose creation or co-creation media are widely credited with, such as new subjectivities, sensory regimes, the nation, the public sphere, globalisation, as well as religious mobilisations of different kinds? What is the role of semiotic and language ideologies, as well as theologies in the presence or absence of dissatisfaction with established forms of mediation in these fields? In distinguishing between different aesthetic 'styles' that either conceal or markedly foreground techniques of mediation in their production of the immediate and real, Mattijs van de Port suggests that the latter strategy bears resemblance to Baroque aesthetics and may, akin to the style of that age, be understood as a response to profound crises and disruptions. Martijn Oosterbaan discusses the uses of interactive digital maps by members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God that not only function as a central dimension of the 'transmedia storytelling' helping to project the global omnipresence of its evangelising mission, but also constitute a response to experienced marginality and unpredictability in the face of global flows. The German news agency journalists assigned to the demanding task of 'slotwork' described by Dominic Boyer experience themselves to be in a chronic technology-induced crisis, which they seek to overcome by combining information practices and technologies to subject the automated torrent of news to their professional agency. Crises of mediation is also an important theme in Birgit Meyer's essay, as she traces disagreements about the production of appropriate religious sensations that new media technologies often prompt in diverse settings. Here the arrival of new technologies often provokes a sense of crisis, destabilising established ideologies about the proper forms of mediation of the spiritual. In contrast, Patrick Eisenlohr emphasises how new media technologies come about as the result of pre-existing anxieties, and seem to offer technical solutions to long-standing social and political dilemmas. Taken together, the papers demonstrate how the study of media practices can elucidate varied and frequently contradictory dimensions of mediation and thus contribute to a fuller understanding of the circulation of culture in the contemporary world.

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